



Friend or foe?

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Friend or foe? John Redmond and the Irish Labour Movement, 1891-1918

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There is an odd consensus between Connollyite and anti-republican historians on John Redmond and his Parliamentary Party. Redmond is presented as a top-hatted conservative, and his party has been caricatured as ‘petit-bourgeois’, ‘openly bourgeois’, and even ‘obesely bourgeois’.¹ As no comprehensive research has been done on the connection between Redmond and Labour, one can only explain this attitude as due to impression, anecdote, and agenda.² James Connolly, of course, never had a good word to say on the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), as that would not have fitted into his conception of history, which was one in which republicans were the progressives on the left, and constitutional nationalists were the reactionaries on the right. Even the greatest labour champion of the 1890s, Michael Davitt, was ignored by Connolly, until Davitt resigned his seat in the House of Commons to go to South Africa and help the Boers in their war against the British. But socialists and republicans like Connolly were far from representative of Labour until 1911-12, when the movement lurched to the left under the impact of Big Jim Larkin, and the party swung to the right with the prospect of an Irish exchequer coming into effect under a Home Rule government. Up to that fork in the road there was a considerable potential for common ground between the moderate aims of the Irish Trades Union Congress (ITUC) and the populist proclivities of the IPP as a ‘tax and spend’ party. So why did Labour and Redmond seem so mutually distant?

Forging the link

Redmond certainly lacked the intense relationship that Charles Stewart Parnell enjoyed with Labour. Davitt recalled being subjected to an exposition by Parnell on the topic. It would be easy to fillet the quote, to represent the chief as sympathetic or hostile to workers, and it is

¹ John O'Donovan, www.theirishstory.com/2012/12/27/the-all-for-ireland-League-1909-1918, accessed 22 March 2018; Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848-1918* (Dublin, 1981), p.152.

² By ‘labour’ is meant those who work; ‘Labour’ refers to the trade union movement and its activists. The only monograph on the IPP and Labour is James McConnel, ‘The Irish Parliamentary Party, industrial relations, and the 1913 Lockout’, *Saothar*, 28 (2003), pp.26-7.

worth citing in full to capture the subtlety of his approach. Characteristically, he spoke with exaggeration, provocation, and equivocation, using Davitt's interest in the Labour movement to tackle an ulterior problem.

I asked him frankly what danger there was in the [O'Shea divorce] case, and whether he had anything to fear. This was his manner of replying: 'Before we talk on that subject,' he remarked, with his usual serene smile, 'there is a matter I want to speak to you about. I don't approve of your labor organization in the South of Ireland [the Irish Democratic Trade and Labour Federation]; it will lead to mischief and can do no good. What do the laborers and artisans want that we cannot obtain for them by the efforts of the National League as well if not better than through those of this new combination? I thought you were opposed to 'class movements'? What is trades-unionism but a landlordism of labor? I would not tolerate, if I were at the head of a government, such bodies as trades-unions. They are opposed to individual liberty and should be kept down, as Bismarck keeps them under in Germany. He is quite right in his policy. Whatever has to be done for the protection of the working-classes in the state should be the duty of the government, and not the work of men like John Burns [the English radical] and others who will by-and-by, unless prevented, organize the working-classes into a power that may be too strong for the government to deal with. I would not allow that condition of things to grow up in Ireland, if I could prevent it in time, and I would most certainly try to do so.'

'But'

'Excuse me a moment. There is yet another consideration I want to insist upon. You are overlooking Mr. Gladstone's position and difficulties. Any agitation in Ireland, except one making directly for Home Rule, increases the obstacles he has to contend against over here. It diverts attention from the main issue of our movement, and your new labor organization in Cork will frighten the capitalist Liberals, and lead them to believe that a Parliament in Dublin might be used for the purpose of furthering some kind of Irish socialism. You ought to know that neither the Irish priests nor the farmers would support such principles. In any case, your laborers and artisans who have waited so long for special legislation can put up with their present conditions until we get Home Rule'.

'When, I suppose, you would deal with them as Bismarck does in Germany?'

This was Mr. Parnell's manner of discussing the subject we had met to consider! It was a superb piece of bluff, and was intended to warn all who might think it a duty to meddle in 'his' affairs to attend to something else. The extraordinary opinions he gave utterance to were possibly the momentary expression of irritation at being asked a question about the divorce case, and not the reflex of his actual views on labor questions and organizations. They were diametrically opposed to many of his previous opinions, emphatically so to what he said and did subsequently when he actually captured the very labor organization he had thus repudiated, and pressed its members into the service of his personal conflict with the majority of his party and of the country. This was, however, but an expedient in the exigencies of a fierce contest. The same opportunist spirit which governed all his political actions would have led him in the event of his reaching the head of an Irish administration, to repress, as far as possible, all

combinations which should seek to question or disturb national authority as he had assailed that of Dublin Castle.³

Bearing out Davitt's observations on pragmatism and expediency, like most advanced nationalists, from the United Irishmen to the Provisionals, Parnell turned to the men of no property when abandoned by the rich. Months after the split in the party, socialists led a convention in Dublin's Antient Concert Rooms to form the Irish Labour League. The adopted programme demanded nationalisation of land and transport, triennial parliaments, manhood suffrage, payment of MPs, taxation of land values, and the removal of tax on food. Parnell addressed the afternoon session, and if he was careful not to go so far as to endorse its manifesto, he was undoubtedly allowing himself to be identified with the League.⁴ Ever since Daniel O'Connell launched the repeal campaign in August 1830, trade unions had supported the leading nationalist movement of the day, be it republican or constitutional, in the belief that free trade with Britain was destroying their jobs and that self-government, tariffs, and state-led industrial development would lead to economic recovery. After the split, the bulk of urban workers were fiercely Parnellite.⁵

It is difficult to imagine Redmond being as expedient or opportunist as Parnell. Nor was he troubled by what the Liberals thought of his social policy. He spoke in favour of trade unionism, social housing, and limiting the hours of employment, and told English Liberals that the IPP had always been 'the friends, the champions, and often the pioneers of the cause of democracy in Great Britain as well as Ireland'.⁶ He also urged workers to organize politically within the IPP. He would insist that he was a Parnellite on the social question, and in that he may have been saying more than he knew. The essentials of Parnell's relationship with labour, and Redmond's too, would survive only as long as Ireland was financially dependent on the British exchequer. Once government spending in Ireland came substantially from the pockets of Irish taxpayers, it was likely to change fundamentally.

Redmond's arrival in Waterford to contest the 1891 bye-election coincided with a purple patch for organized Labour. The trades council, or Trades Club as it was called, had agreed in August 1889 to affiliate to the Irish Federated Trades and Labour Union, founded in

³ Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland, or The Story of the Land League Revolution* (London, 1904), pp.635-7.

⁴ John W. Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington DC, 1988), pp.135-6.

⁵ See Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-2000* (Dublin, 2011), pp.21-7, 59-62.

⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 6 January 1911, cited in James McConnel, *The Irish Parliamentary Party and the Third Home Rule Crisis* (Dublin, 2013), pp.170-1.

Dublin's Angel Hotel on 4 May.⁷ It was the first of four contemporary attempts at forming a national trade union congress. Though the initiative never came to fruition, the Trades Club continued as the Waterford Federated Trades and Labour Union, and represented about twenty unions at peak. The most important of these was the Amalgamated Society of Porkbutchers. Formed in 1890 by salters in Waterford, Limerick, and Cork, the three major centre of the trades, the Society quickly established its reputation by defeating a general lockout and winning a wage increase.⁸ The Special Branch thought the Trades Club a den of Fenianism, and it went overwhelmingly Parnellite on the split, voting 291-28 to endorse the city's MP, Richard Power, in his support for the chief.⁹ Power was also an honorary vice-president of the club. When Power died in November 1891, the ensuing bye-election created some extraordinary ironies. The trade societies published long lists of 'splendid subscriptions' to Parnellite funds, and workers gave active physical backing to Redmond. His opponent, Davitt, an advocate of secular education, enjoyed the blessing of the Catholic clergy. The day of Davitt's election convention saw rioting between rival factions, and priests who came to support Davitt had to defend themselves with their umbrellas. On 13 December, the first day of the canvass, an angry swarm of Parnellites closed the toll gates on Timbertoes against a National Federation cavalcade. Rioting and baton charges followed intervention by the Royal Irish Constabulary.¹⁰

A notable aspect of the press coverage of the contest was the attention it gave to labour. The six bacon factories around Ballybricken were Waterford's only industry of significance at this time, and provided direct employment for about 850 men, together with 150 pig-buyers. The *London Times*, among others, thought the workers in the bacon trade to be a key factor in the bye-election, and both candidates targeted them. Given his outstanding record in the service of labour, Davitt was confident. Instead, responding to Redmond, they refused an address from Davitt, and the *Times* reported that all anti-Parnellites were barred from union meeting rooms and the Trades Club.¹¹ The fanatical loyalty of Ballybricken is the salient social dimension to Redmondism in Waterford. Every city in Ireland has its Ballybricken: it's usually the oldest industrial suburb and the repository of the city's character, as well as its characters. Ballybricken was typical also in its radical, republican

⁷ Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, pp.134-5.

⁸ Emmet O'Connor, *A Labour History of Waterford* (Waterford, 1989), pp.90-92.

⁹ National Archives, Dublin, DICS/3, January 1890.

¹⁰ For the bye-election see Pat McCarthy, *The Redmonds and Waterford, A Political Dynasty, 1891-1952* (Dublin, 2018), pp.19-28.

¹¹ *The Times*, 15-17 December 1891.

politics. Dublin Castle thought it home to ‘all the active Fenians of Waterford’ in 1868.¹² What made Ballybricken unusual was the pig-buyers, who were more middle-class, and had accrued a confidence, resilience, and spirit of enterprise from their social status, gregarious occupation, mobility, and reputation. Shortly after Redmond’s victory in the bye-election, the *Waterford News* reported:

The Ballybricken men, who are constantly moving about, have everywhere received the warmest congratulations on their spirited action in connection with the election. On Sunday at Kilkenny, thousands waited, with flaming torches and beating drums to give them a magnificent demonstration of welcome on their first visit to the Smokeless City since the National triumph.¹³

The link between Redmond and the pig-buyers was cemented in the bacon trade dispute in 1896/97, fought by the buyers against efforts by the bacon factors to cut costs by dealing directly with farmers, and making them redundant. Redmond became the hero of the hour when he defended successfully in court the pig-buyers accused of assault and disorder during the dispute. For Labour, the outcome of the struggle was a disaster. Salters had been pressured into taking sympathetic action in support of the pig-buyers and about fifty in Denny’s and Matterson’s lost their jobs. The fatally weakened Amalgamated Society of Porkbutchers was powerless to help them, and did not survive.¹⁴

It is easy to explain the origins of Waterford’s loyalty to Redmond: it is patently found in Parnellism. Why it persisted is not so obvious. There is little evidence of interaction between Redmond and labour in Waterford. One would expect lobbies to the local MP for government contracts for local industries, more and better housing, or investment in infrastructure, but none survive. Of course that may be due to the absence of records. We do have some scattered evidence. Obituaries noted Redmond’s work to improve the housing of the working classes, 200 workers from the munitions factory in Bilberry marched in his funeral cortege, and the local branch of the National Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union paraded in support of Captain William A. Redmond during the subsequent bye-election campaign.¹⁵ The Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union had grown exceptionally anti-German in consequence of the U-

¹² National Archives, Dublin, Fenian R series, 3009 R.

¹³ *Waterford News*, 16 January 1892.

¹⁴ National Archives of the United Kingdom, London, CO 903/6, July 1897; *Waterford News*, 13 March 1897.

¹⁵ *Munster Express*, 16 March 1918.

boat attacks, and was a pariah in the Labour movement for its jingoist stance on the war, being expelled from Congress in November 1918.¹⁶

Common ground

The detachment of John Redmond and labour was a two-way process. Labour, like Irish society generally, had become heavily anglicized in the late 19th century and came to see the English way as ‘the way’: the path from poverty to progress. When the ITUC was founded in 1894, it was modelled on its British namesake in almost every respect. That entailed abandoning labour-nationalism. British Labour saw the two as dichotomous. English nationalism was identified with the Tories, and Scottish and Welsh nationalism were seen as a threat to the unity of British trade unionism, which was now consolidating on an all-British basis. So the ITUC decided it should stand back from the IPP. There is no other explanation of its political strategy. The argument that the IPP was too conservative to engage with Congress doesn’t stand up.

Several Nationalists MPs had labour associations: notably Davitt, Eugene Crean, former president of Cork trades council, Richard McGhee, a follower of Henry George and founder of the National Union of Dock Labourers and the Ulster Labourers’ Union, Dan Boyle, a former railway clerk and advocate of municipalization and the eight hour day, Michael Joyce, a former Labour councillor on Limerick Corporation, William Abraham, an old Fenian and one time Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners’ delegate to the British Trades Union Congress, T.P. O’Connor, editor of the British radical newspaper, the *Star*, and William Field, D.D. Sheehan, Kendal O’Brien, and J.J. O’Shee, leaders of the land and labour associations.¹⁷ John Redmond’s more radical brother, Willie, called himself a ‘progressive democrat’, and would work with Connolly on the Irish Transvaal Committee during the Boer War.¹⁸ Rating them less for their politics than their personality, ITUC officers preferred to deal with ex union officials, cut from the same cloth as themselves. Their first liaison in the IPP was Michael Austin, founding secretary of Davitt’s Democratic Trade and Labour Federation. In 1901 they noted with regret the resignation of Austin, to whom they had been ‘indebted for much attention’, and ‘rejoiced’ in the election of J.P. Nannetti, a

¹⁶ Ulster University, Magee College library (UUMC), Irish Trades Union Congress and Labour Party, *Annual Report* (1917), pp.40-8; Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of a Special Conference* (1918), pp.95-9.

¹⁷ McConnel, ‘The Irish Parliamentary Party, industrial relations, and the 1913 Lockout’, pp.26-7.

¹⁸ Terence Denman, *Lonely Grave: The Life and Death of Willie Redmond* (Dublin, 1995), p.65; *Freeman’s Journal*, 13 November 1911. Denman called him a ‘state socialist’.

former secretary and president of Dublin trades council, as MP for Dublin's College Green division.¹⁹ Nannetti would serve as Redmond's labour attaché and the ITUC's unofficial liaison with the party. It soon became customary for the ITUC's parliamentary committee to forward copies of Congress resolutions to the secretary of the party at Westminster, and to receive a reply promising favourable consideration. In 1902 Nannetti introduced the parliamentary committee to Redmond, who hoped that, in future, such meetings 'might be more frequent than in the past'.²⁰ The hope was barely fulfilled, with further meetings in 1904, 1909, 1911, and 1914. When the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, declined to meet a Congress delegation on the National Insurance bill in 1911, they eventually secured an interview through the intervention of Redmond and Joe Devlin.²¹

Redmond told the parliamentary committee in 1909:

When I entered the House of Commons there was no Labour Party, but for my part I have always claimed, and, I think, truthfully claimed, that in that state of affairs the work of the Labour Party was done by the Irish Party. Since the Labour Party came into existence in England we have found ourselves, I may say, generally speaking, in complete sympathy with them and their aims and objects: we have supported them on almost every occasion, and in the same way, they, I am happy to be able to say, without a single exception, have supported Home Rule for Ireland...we will welcome communications and advice from you, and assistance from you; and we will in future, as in the past, endeavour to fulfil for Ireland in the fullest sense the function of a Labour Party, believing that we are the Labour Party, as far as Ireland is concerned.²²

There are numerous corresponding testimonies from British Labour. Keir Hardie, the party's founding father, advised the Independent Labour Party annual conference in 1901:

A considerable number of the representatives from Ireland were men who, by training and instinct, were in the closest sympathy with the claims and aspirations of the workers, and they had given many proofs of the fact that their sympathies in this direction were not bounded by the Irish sea. The truest representatives of Democratic feeling in the house of commons were the Irish Parliamentary Party, a fact which the workers of Britain would do well to recognise.²³

¹⁹ UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1901), p.24.

²⁰ UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1902), pp.24-6.

²¹ UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1904), p.35; *Annual Report* (1909), p.10; *Annual Report* (1911), pp.24-5; *Annual Report* (1914), p.14.

²² UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1909), p.10.

²³ Quoted in Boyle, *The Irish Labor Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 240.

The parliamentary committee regularly recorded its appreciation of the Nationalist MPs. Moreover, Nationalist sympathy contrasted with Unionist hostility. When, to reassure the Ulster delegates, the parliamentary committee copied resolutions of the 1902 Congress to the Unionist leader, Colonel E.J. Saunderson, it did not receive ‘even an acknowledgment’. William Walker, the leading Labour-Unionist in Belfast, congratulated Redmond in 1904 on his MPs’ support for ‘the cause of Labour’, and regretted that the Unionists were not similarly ‘energetic’ – something of a euphemism for MPs who normally voted with the Tories at Westminster. Another Congress approach to the Unionists in 1911 also failed to receive an acknowledgment.²⁴

This is not to suggest that the IPP was very left wing, but it was a ‘tax and spend’ party. As long as the money was coming from the British taxpayer, it was happy to call for more houses, more government investment in Ireland, better health and safety legislation, more factory inspectors etc. and these were the staple fare in ITUC debate, which itself held a very incremental view of progress.

The fork in the road

The relationship with Nationalist MPs was never entirely satisfactory. It was frustrating that they did not always vote in numbers on measures of importance to Labour. The 1908 Congress agreed that ‘our Parliamentary representatives have for many years past been almost entirely devoted to the interests of the tenant farmers and landlords’, and urged Labour to ‘claim...representation in Parliament’.²⁵ The problem for Labour was that it would neither engage more fully with the IPP or form a party of its own.

Things would change in 1911 when the ITUC moved left under the influence of Jim Larkin, and the IPP moved to the right as an Irish exchequer hived into view. Unions were particularly annoyed about the IPP’s position on the National Insurance bill in 1911, which provided for free medical treatment and unemployment insurance. To Labour’s consternation, the *Irish Independent*, the Catholic hierarchy, and sections of the medical profession condemned the bill as an unnecessary expense. Between May and July the *Independent* railed against the bill in fifteen editorials. The IPP upheld the bill in principle, as it was obliged to do under the pact it had entered into with the Liberals to get legislation for Home Rule, but

²⁴ UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1902), pp.24-5; *Annual Report* (1903), p.31; *Annual Report* (1911), p.18.

²⁵ UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1908), pp.53-4.

opposed the extension of the bill's medical provisions to Ireland.²⁶ There were, too, other disturbing instances of Ireland's exclusion from social legislation, such as the Sweated Industries bill and the Feeding of Necessitous School Children bill.²⁷ Trade unionists suspected that with an Irish government and exchequer in the pipeline, the IPP was revising its hitherto indulgent attitude towards public spending, and that here was 'a foretaste of what they were going to get in the future under Home Rule'.²⁸ The *Irish Independent* said as much in its editorials.

Larkin's influence in Congress would herald the beginning of regular engagement with the IPP throughout the Home Rule crisis. It was a paradoxical development in that, as a republican, Larkin was utterly hostile to Redmond and his party. The parliamentary committee convened specially on 1 July 1911 to digest submissions from affiliates on the Insurance bill.²⁹ A meeting with Redmond, Devlin, and, John Dillon in Dublin's Gresham Hotel followed on 16 July. Opening the discussion with the Insurance bill, Larkin went on to urge amendments to the Government of Ireland bill to ensure fair representation for Labour and full adult suffrage, demand protection for workers recently driven from their employments by loyalists in Belfast, and, in the light of the recent *Titanic* disaster, appeal for adequate life-saving apparatus on ships. Other committee members spoke on the railway bill, wage rates, government contracts in Ireland, reforms to the Truck Act and the Shop Act, and the extension of the Feeding of Necessitous School Children Act to Ireland. Redmond promised favourable consideration of all points except the Insurance bill, and sought to mollify the ITUC by promising that the IPP would introduce amending legislation to have medical benefits extended to Ireland if it could be shown that the demand existed, by facilitating Congress lobbying at Westminster, and by appointing Devlin to the IPP's committee on the bill. 'Wee Joe', MP for Belfast West, had an impressive record of service on behalf of the city's textile workers and supported the ITUC's position on the bill.³⁰ When Lloyd George declined to meet a Congress delegation, an interview was secured, on 17 July, through Redmond and Devlin. Ultimately, the National Insurance Act did not extend medical

²⁶ The most detailed discussion of the National Insurance Act and Ireland is in Ruth Barrington, *Health, Medicine, and Politics in Ireland, 1900-1970* (Dublin, 1987), pp.39-66, and says remarkably little on trade union objections. *Irish Independent*, 10-12, 15, 25, 30 May, 1-2, 6, 12, 29 June, 7, 14-15, 18 July 1911.

²⁷ UUMC, Dublin trades council minutes, 31 May 1911.

²⁸ UUMC, Belfast trades council minutes, 7 December 1911.

²⁹ UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1912), p.21.

³⁰ Emmet O'Connor, *Big Jim Larkin: Hero or Wrecker?* (Dublin, 2015), p.10; A.C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), pp.132-3.

benefits to Ireland, and the eventual shape of the Act was as negative for the development of Irish health services as it was positive for the evolution of the British welfare state.

Redmond has also been criticised for his non-intervention in the 1913 lock-out. In fact there was a marked difference in the nationalist response to a strike-wave that began with the national rail strike in 1911. The national rail strike was unprecedented and alarmed Irish employers. Broadly speaking, constitutional nationalists deplored the introduction of what they saw as continental syndicalist militancy, while republicans thought the pay and conditions of workers were more deserving of condemnation.³¹ Redmond's silence on the 1913 lockout left him to the charge of indifference, but the more remarkable thing is that the IPP did not come out against Larkin, who was after all a republican and a syndicalist. The parliamentary committee again met Redmond and Devlin in May 1914 to discuss social legislation and impress on them its opposition to partition.³² Perhaps Redmond's greatest, and unwitting, influence on the ITUC was persuading delegates that it was time to form a Labour Party in order to be ready to contest elections for the Home Rule parliament, which, they assumed, would convene in 'the old house in College Green' in late 1914.

Larkin and Connolly were fiercely critical of Redmond's position on the world war. A popular ditty of the time summed up their attitude:

Full steam ahead,
John Redmond said
that everything was well chum.
Home Rule will come when we're dead
and buried out in Belgium.

For both it was not just a republican issue. Larkin had an impeccable record of opposition to war, including the Boer War and the recent Balkan wars. Redmond's cheery glorification of the slaughter in Flanders is as shocking to modern ears as anything Patrick Pearse wrote on dying for Ireland. They were critical too of his opposition to votes for women. Connolly at least was an ardent feminist.

Labour and the IPP would come together with Sinn Féin in the conscription crisis. At this stage the ITUC and Labour Party, as it was called, was robustly anti-war and close to Sinn Féin. The only question was how close it would get. All of the main parties were

³¹ O'Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland*, p.85.

³² UUMC, ITUC, *Annual Report* (1914), pp.14-16.

becoming nervous about the anticipated post-war radicalism. Sir Edward Carson would establish the Ulster Unionist Labour Association. Devlin, the IPP's labour spokesman since the death of Nannetti, proposed a 'New Democratic Movement', committed to co-partnership in industry and profit sharing. Devlin also maintained that Sinn Féin's policy of abstention from Westminster was tantamount to saying 'Labour must wait' for the dim and distant republic before any progress could be made on legislation for social reform. The phrase got legs, and the fiction that Éamon de Valera had actually decreed that 'Labour must wait' survived as one of the great myths of Irish political history.³³ Captain Redmond made what he could of it in the bye-election that followed his father's death:

If Dr [Vincent] White [the Sinn Féin candidate] were...elected on Friday, and if he did not intend to represent them in the House of Commons, who would be there to look after the commerce, trade, labourers, seamen, firemen, railwaymen, industries and great educational institutions of Waterford? He knew the answer Mr De Valera gave them on a former occasion when asked about the interests of the workingmen. He said 'Labour can wait'. 'We say', said Capt Redmond, 'Labour must not wait' (cheers).³⁴

In October Sinn Féin offered Labour a clear run against the IPP in four Dublin constituencies if its candidates would pledge to abstain from Westminster. On 1 November, at the behest of the party's political director, Tom Johnson, Labour made the famous decision to withdraw from the forthcoming general election. Johnson explained that he had been expecting a 'War Election,' and now was faced with a 'Peace Election'.³⁵ Asked what the difference was, he seemed embarrassed and waffled into digression. The difference was abstention. It was not controversial as long as the war was on, conscription was a possibility, and the IPP and Sinn Féin were boycotting Westminster. Now, it seemed the war would end within weeks, and Labour reckoned that while Sinn Féin was sure to win a majority of nationalist seats, a substantial number of IPP MPs would be returned and would take their seats in parliament, leaving Labour in the awkward position of having to choose between attending Westminster and tying themselves to the chariot wheel of Sinn Féin. At least for Johnson, a nice man who hated confrontation and was hopelessly ill-equipped for leadership, it was an awkward prospect.

³³ D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, 'Labour must wait', the making of a myth', *Saothar*, 26 (2001), pp.61-5.

³⁴ *Munster Express*, 23 March 1918.

³⁵ UUMC, Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, *Report of a Special Conference* (1918), pp.95-9.

Conclusion

It was inevitable that the debate on Redmond would be framed by the national question, but unfortunate that we have defined Redmond so narrowly in terms of his position on Ulster, the world war, and the Easter Rising. Neither Redmond or the IPP were as conservative as historians have made them out to be. Ireland's dependency on Britain allowed them, indeed it compelled them, to be a 'tax and spend' party. However, their attitude to the National Insurance Act and its medical provisions suggests that things would be different once an Irish parliament was in College Green. Home Rule would be cheap rule. Meanwhile, there was plenty of scope for the IPP to accommodate social demands. But while farmers, town tenants, agricultural workers, businessmen, and ratepayers all made effective use of the party to advance their sectional interests, Labour reneged, guided by a British idea that trade unionism and nationalism were dichotomous. That was a mistake, for which Redmond was not to blame. It was up to Labour to fight its corner.

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